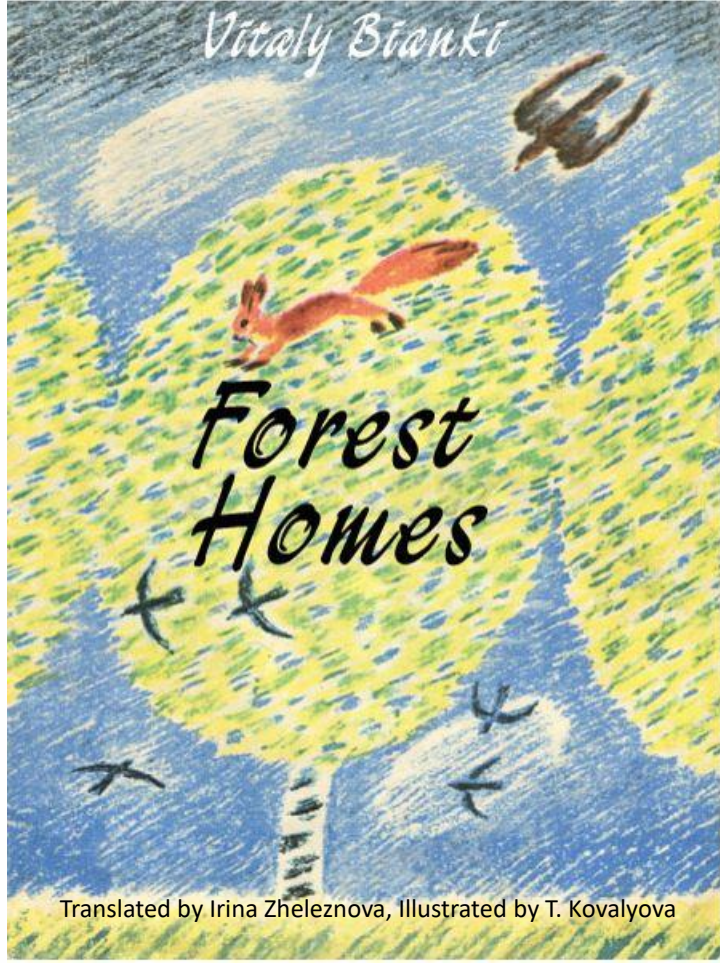
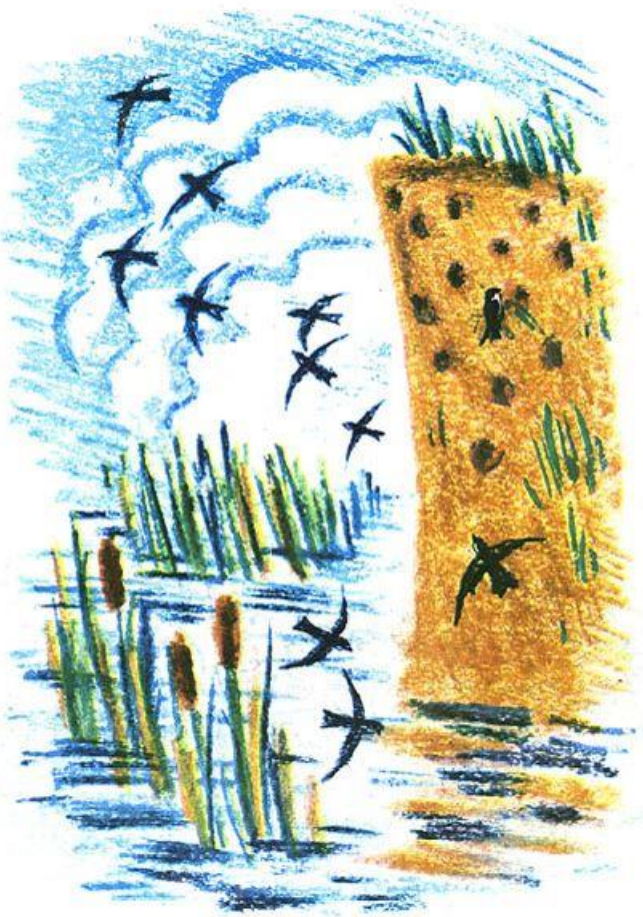


Vitaly Bianki

Forest Homes

Translated by Irina Zheleznova, Illustrated by T. Kovalyova





High over the river, above a steep cliff, young river swallows darted back and forth chasing each other, shrilling and twittering. They were playing tag in the air. Little Swallow was so quick that no one could catch her. She always managed to duck or dart away. She would fly hither and thither, up and down, streaking off so fast her wings never stopped moving, not even for a moment.



Suddenly, Falcon appeared in the blue sky. The wind whistled through the feathers of his sharply-curved wings.



The flock of swallows was terror-stricken. They scattered instantly, each swallow flying off in a different direction. In a flash, they were gone.

Little Swallow never once looked back as she winged away over the river, the wood and the lake beyond. Falcon was a very dangerous bird to play tag with.

Little Swallow flew on until she had no strength to fly any farther. Then she turned to look back. No one was chasing her but she was in a strange place. She saw a river, but this was not a familiar river. It was one she had never seen before.

Little Swallow became frightened. She could not recall the way back home and no wonder, for she had been so terrified, she had never looked around to get her bearings.

It would soon be evening. What was she to do?

She flew down, perched on a twig and wept bitterly. Suddenly, she saw a little yellow bird come running along the sand. Little Swallow was happy to see it, "Won't you please tell me how to get home?" she said.

"Where are you from?"

"I don't know."

"Then why don't you stay over at my house? My name is Plover, and I live nearby."

Plover ran off a few steps and pointed his beak at the sand. Then he bowed, and swayed on his spindly legs and said, "Here's my house. Come on in."

Little Swallow looked hard, but could not see anything that resembled a house, only sand and pebbles.

"Can't you see it? Here, over here, where the eggs are." Little Swallow finally made out the four speckled eggs.



"What's the matter? Don't you like my house?"

Little Swallow didn't know what to say. If she said it was no house at all. Plover would be hurt. So she said, "I'm not used to sleeping out in the open on cold sand."

"That's too bad. Try Dove's house in the fir grove over there. He has a house with a floor. You can spend the night there."

"Thank you." Little Swallow flew off to the fir grove. She had no trouble finding Dove and asked him to let her spend the night at his house.

"All right, if you like it here."

Actually, all there was to his house was a floor. It was as full of holes as a sieve. He had simply thrown some twigs across the branches every which way.

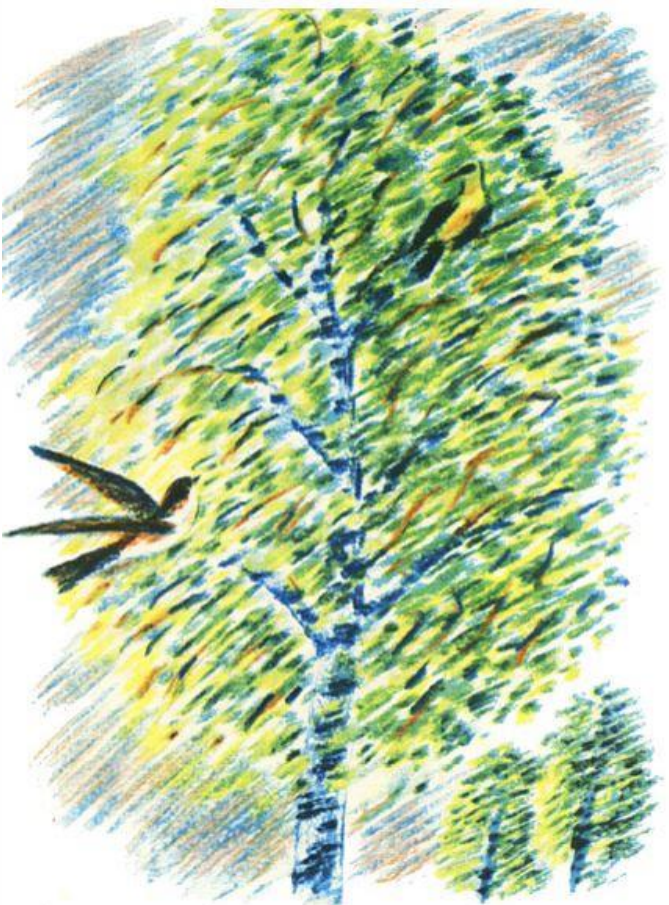


Little Swallow was surprised. "There's only a floor. Your house doesn't have any walls. How can you sleep here?"

"Well, if you want a house that has walls, you'd better try Oriole's place. I think you'll like it."

Dove told Little Swallow the address: the most beautiful birch tree in the grove. Little Swallow flew off towards the birch grove. All the trees there seemed beautiful to her. She searched hard for Oriole's house. Then she saw a lovely little house attached to a small branch. It seemed very cozy and looked just like a rose made of fine bits of gray paper.

"What a tiny house Oriole has! There's no room for me at all," Little Swallow said to herself. Still, she decided to knock. At that very moment, a swarm of hornets came buzzing out of the little gray house.



They swarmed around her and buzzed angrily. They looked as though they might sting her.

Little Swallow flew away from them as fast as she could!

All of a sudden something gold and black flashed by.



Then Little Swallow made out a golden bird with black wings on one of the branches.
"Where are you hurrying to, Little Swallow?"

"I'm looking for Oriole's house."

"I'm Oriole. My house is right here on this beautiful birch tree."

Little Swallow looked at the spot, but could not see anything except the green leaves and white branches of the tree. When she had a really good look she gasped.

There, high above the ground, a light, pocket-shaped basket was attached to a little branch. It was beautifully woven of fibers, grass, strands of wool and hair, and bits of paper-thin birch bark.



"Oh! I'd never stay in such a flimsy house! It makes me dizzy just to see it swinging in the wind!"

Golden Oriole sounded hurt as she said, "Then go to Chiff-Chaffs house. You'll probably like her tent, because it has a roof."

Little Swallow set off for Chiff-Chaffs house.

Chiff-Chaff lived in the grass near the birch tree.

Little Swallow liked her tent: it was made of dry grass and moss. "How cozy this is! It has a floor and walls, and a roof, and a feather bed. Just like our home."

Chiff-Chaff was very glad to have company. But just then, the ground began to tremble. Little Swallow was frightened. She listened to the thundering noise, but Chiff-Chaff said, "it's only some horses galloping towards the grove."

"Will your roof cave in if a horse steps on it? "

Chiff-Chaff nodded sadly.



"Oh, this is a terrible place!" Little Swallow darted out of the tent.
"I'd never be able to sleep a wink here! Our home is much safer."

"You probably have a house like Grebe's," Chiff-Chaff said. Do you want me to take you there?"

"Yes!" And so they flew off to the lake to find Grebe. There, on a little island of reeds surrounded by water was a large-headed bird. Its head feathers stuck up like tiny horns.



Chiff-Chaff said goodbye to Little Swallow.

There was a dent in the middle of the pile and it was lined with soft swamp grass. Grebe's eggs were on it. Grebe was perched on the edge of the floating island, sailing around the lake as if the island was a boat. Little Swallow asked Grebe if she could stay on the island.

"My house isn't a boat. It goes wherever the wind blows, so we'll be rocking and bobbing all night."

"I'm scared. I want to go home!"

Grebe became angry. "My! Aren't you fussy! Nothing seems to please you! Well, you go find yourself whatever you want."



Little Swallow flew off. She was weeping bitterly. Soon she found a dense house on a large branch of a tall fir tree. It was round and made of sticks and branches. The inside was lined with soft, warm moss. "Just the place I've been looking for. It's sturdy and it has a roof." Little Swallow tapped on the wall with her beak and said in a pitiful voice, "Won't you please let me in for the night?"

Suddenly a terrible brown furry head with bristling whiskers and yellow teeth appeared. The monster growled: "Since when do birds come knocking at squirrels' houses, asking to be let in?"



Little Swallow was frightened to death. Her blood froze. She darted away, soared over the wood and flew off as fast as she could, never once looking back.

She flew on and on until she had no strength to fly any farther. Then she looked down and saw a river. It was her own dear river!

She plummeted down to the river, and soared up again to the edge of the steep cliff. And there she disappeared.

The side of the cliff was dotted with holes. Each hole was a swallow's nest. She darted into it and she reached the end of it she flitted into a round, roomy den. Her mother was waiting for her there.

Tired Little Swallow slept ever so soundly that night on her own soft, warm bed of dry grass, horsehair and feathers.

Goodnight.